

DENGEKI G's

VOLUME NINETEEN!

19

NOVEL

乃木
若葉
は
勇者
である

ウルトラ
怪獣
擬人化
計画

設定・原案・シリーズ構成
海法紀光
執筆：谷崎央佳（ミー・ムーン）
イラスト：朱ハル犬
原作・監修：円谷プロダクション

企画原案・シリーズ構成

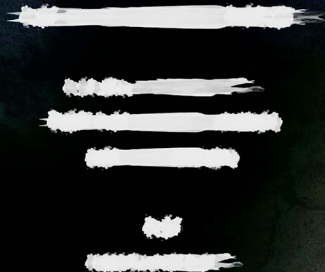
タカヒロ（みなとそふと）

執筆：朱白あおい

イラスト：BUNBUN

監修：Project 2H

MAISHA RECORD DEPARTMENT - MIHO-SAMA
CENSORED



Hero Record January Year One Divine Era

Nogi Wakaba's Record



- "Haaaaaahh!!"

Imbued with the power of Daitengu, Wakaba ferociously continued the fight. Surrounding her were several Vertexes as well as three large Vertexes-- One whose body was segmented into countless joints, one with four horns, and one accompanied by two gigantic bubbles.

Now that Wakaba had used a trump card among trump cards, the common Vertexes were no longer a threat. The large Vertexes were a different story, however.

In addition to the three large Vertexes attacking Wakaba, another three had headed toward the Shinju. She had no choice but to leave those three up to Yuuna. As longtime comrades in arms, Wakaba trusted her.

- "Gh, ghack...!"

Wakaba's face twisted in pain as she spat out blood. Her wings allowed her to travel through the air at high speeds, but the way she fought using that ability had taken a significant toll on her body. The tremendous gravitational forces exerted on her body from high-speed flight was damaging her internal organs and her brain. She was whittling away at her body little by little simply continuing the fight.

Nevertheless, she continued to fight without a moment's rest. A battle against Vertexes was a battle against time as well. The longer the Vertexes remained within the barrier, the longer the Jukai corroded, causing damage to Shikoku as well.

In the blink of an eye, Wakaba slashed the segmented Vertex five times. But the six sliced segments simply regrew into six full-sized bodies which attacked Wakaba from all angles simultaneously.

Wakaba dodged the attacks with aerial maneuvers while observing the enemy. Since they had fought an evolved Vertex with a similar property, she was able to calmly assess the situation. Upon closer inspection, one of the six divided bodies was moving differently from the others. And whenever Wakaba attacked the outlier, the other five would defend it. The outlier was probably the control center of the group.

- "... This is it!!"

Wakaba sliced it in half. Without the control center, the other five bodies apparently lost their regeneration ability; when Wakaba sliced each one apart, they vanished instead of dividing into new entities.

But right as she was about to slay the last one, she found herself caught in a giant bubble.

- "...!?"

The two-bubbled Vertex had attacked her. Wakaba tried to move her wings to escape the bubble, but the four-horned Vertex thrust its horn into the water. The next moment, the horn began rapidly vibrating.

- "...Ghhbbh!?"

The horn's vibration caused the water to churn rapidly, rendering Wakaba's attempts to escape with her wings futile. She was cut off from air, her body's oxygen levels depleting. Her thoughts grew hazy from her brain's oxygen deprivation.

(Khh...!!)

From within the bubble, Wakaba could see yet another new large Vertex that had crossed over from the wall-- one with a giant arrow sticking out of a giant mouth. In the back of Wakaba's mind, she recalled the sight of devastated cityscapes and people slaughtered by monsters. She recalled the cruel deaths of Tamako, Anzu, and Chikage. The rage and hatred within made her sick to the stomach.

--"Aaaaaahhhhhhhhh!!!"

--I'll kill you all.

I'll massacre every last one of you damn monsters. I'll give you your just reward. Doesn't matter what tricks you pull. I will find you. And I will kill you.

But no matter how much rage boiled within Wakaba, it still did not help her escape from the bubble.

Eventually she reached her limits, and her consciousness began to fade...

In the end, she recalled was the sight of the girl who had been with her since childhood-- Uesato Hinata. And then Yuuna, Tamako, Anzu, and Chikage. She recalled the days they had all spent together.

(I...)

In the past, Wakaba had fought solely for the sake of avenging those killed by the Vertexes. But thanks to Hinata and her other friends, she learned to instead fight for the sake of protecting those who lived. Wakaba was fighting not for revenge, but to protect people. To protect Hinata, and Yuuna, and all people of Shikoku.

(Don't let the fairy's influence take you hostage...!)

By setting aside her rage and focusing on her desire to protect, Wakaba regained her composure.

(I... will protect Shikoku from these monsters... and return to a life surrounded by friends...!)

Once this battle's over, let's go hang out with Yuuna and Hinata again. That time we spent the other day was fun, but it wasn't nearly enough. We said we'd go to the summer festival together too. I'm sure we'll see plenty of beautiful fireworks. Let's go check out all the stands too. Yukatas are too stiff to move in, so I don't want to wear one, but I guess I might as well if it'll make Hinata happy.

Once this battle's over, I'm sure we'll have plenty of time on our hands. The three of us can go to a bunch of different places. We can go to faraway places too. Now that I think about it, we haven't gone on any field trips. How about we go visit Tamako, Anzu, and Chikage's hometowns? Yuuna's hometown is especially far away, so maybe we can't go there yet, huh. But I'm sure the three of us can go there someday.



Once this battle's over, I wonder what sort of life we'll live? Our hero duties will be over, so I wonder if we'll live like normal middle schoolers. Maybe we'll have to think about our academic and professional career paths. Maybe we'll start feeling sad once graduation comes about. But I'm sure we'll laugh it off and agree to be friends forever.

Even those days--

(Even those days will be fun, don't you think? Hinata? Yuuna?)

So we can't let the world end.

Daitengu-- Its association with fire runs deep. According to legend, it burned down the heavens in one night and destroyed half of Kyoto in a large fire. As one of the three great evil yokai, this demon of fire was an unfathomable force and a threat to even the gods.

Wakaba focused her concentration.

From the moment she imbued herself with Daitengu, she instinctively understood how to use its power.

-"RoOOohhhhhh!!!"

She yelled out in fighting spirit and the bubble surrounding her began to boil away.

In just a few seconds, the bubble was nothing more than mist in the air.

A veil of fire surrounded itself around Wakaba, as if to protect her.

Daitengu's flame had once burned down the heavens, and now it bore its fangs at the monsters who came down from the heavens.

-"Haaaahhh!!!"

Wakaba charged at the bubble Vertex as it was the closest. With a flash of her unsheathed blade, flames engulfed the cut Vertex, burning it to nothingness.

Before even a moment had passed, Wakaba cleaved the nearby four-horned Vertex in half. Flames burned as this Vertex too disappeared.

The flames surrounding Wakaba grew infinitely bigger and stronger. As if to fully cover the Forestized world--

Amidst the intensity of that heat, the common Vertexes burned up one by one.

From within the blazing flames, Wakaba set her sights on the two remaining large Vertexes: the last body of the segmented Vertex she had nearly finished off, and the arrow-mouthed Vertex.

Wakaba herself was no exception to the damage of the flame's heat. Her hero outfit was burning away, her skin inflamed with burns.

- "We humans... are weak. We're cowardly, fragile, and prone to malice... But even so..."

Even so, Wakaba believed. She believed in human strength.

After all, as long as they had something to protect, there was no limit to how strong humans could become.

Even now, no matter how wounded Wakaba was, she could still fight as long as it meant protecting those important to her. She could get back up and fight without losing her morale.

That's what set humanity apart from these monsters.

- "This is why we... even as weak humans... can defeat you monsters, no matter how strong you are!"

The flames engulfing her still burning, Wakaba gripped her sword firmly and closed in on the remaining two large Vertexes.

Wakaba fought on with the wrath of an Asura, ready to sacrifice her own body if need be.

With sword and flame, she began destroying every last Vertex-- large and common alike.

Eventually, her body became too battered to even stand, and as she fell to the ground--

She was all alone in the Jukai.

Every last Vertex had been annihilated.

(Hinata... Yuuna... I... protected... everything...)

Her consciousness finally faded.

The next time Wakaba woke up, she found herself in a hospital room. The same white room she had become familiarized with ever since she began her duties as a hero.

And sitting right beside her bed was Hinata, who hugged Wakaba tearfully as soon as she realized she was awake.

- "Wakaba-chan!! Thank goodness... you woke up...!"

- "Hinata..."

- "The invading Vertexes... were all defeated thanks to you and Yuuna-san's efforts. You protected Shikoku. But... you haven't waken up all this time... You've been asleep for over a week already..."

- "It's been... that long, huh... Ow!!"

- "Ah, I'm sorry!"

Hinata quickly stepped back away from Wakaba. The hug had hurt Wakaba due to the injuries she had incurred in the battle with the Vertexes.



Wakaba had broken several bones, injured some internal organs, and burned or otherwise wounded the entire rest of her body-- Without the Shinju's divine protection granted unto her as a hero, her injuries would have been undoubtedly fatal.

"It's okay... More importantly, how's Yuuna?"

"...!"

As soon as she had heard Yuuna's name, Hinata's body stiffened. The mere sight of that reaction caused Wakaba to fear for the worst.

"... No way..."

Hinata looked down and answered in a bitter tone.

"During her battle with the Vertexes... Yuuna-san's vital signs ceased... Her body has not been discovered... but they say there's no possibility that she survived..."

"...!"

The heroes' locations were indicated on the smartphone map. The Taisha had a constant reading on the heroes' vital signs. If that signal had disappeared, then that meant--

"Yuuna... is dead..."

A trembling voice seeped out of Wakaba's mouth.

"Huh... n-no... no... Everyone... died...? No heroes survived... except... for me..."

Yuuna. She was always bright, and always cared for those around her. How many times had she been there to save Wakaba?

Tamako. She was always boisterous, always competitive. How many times had she been there to cheer Wakaba up?

Anzu. Always mature, always worked hard despite lacking the disposition for fighting. How dazzling her proactive nature was to behold.

Chikage. They may have fought. They may have argued. But Wakaba did not hate how human she was.

But-- now--

She had lost all of them.

"Ugh... uugh...!!"

A groaning voice seeped from Wakaba's lips.

Wakaba required a long stay in the hospital for recovery and medical treatment.

Hinata visited her every day.

One day, Hinata spoke to Wakaba as she peeled an apple given as a sort of hospital visit gift.

- "We lost so many things... But thanks to everyone's efforts, Shikoku has been successfully defended. The barrier has been strengthened, too. It's apparently become impenetrable to things like common Vertexes."

- "I see... That's good..."

- "Apparently the Taisha are in discussions to designate Shikoku as a land protected by the Shinju's roots-- in other words, a 'Neno-Katasu-Kuni', a nation of the roots."

- "... Okay..."

Wakaba answered half-heartedly as she listened to Hinata. All the words seemed to stream in through one ear and out the other.

Hinata made sure to give Wakaba space. Instead of forcefully trying to encourage her more than necessary, she simply continued to stay by her side.

Hinata gently touched Wakaba's hand. Wakaba's body was still riddled with painful-looking burn scars.

- "You pushed yourself so far..."

Even with all the modern skin transplant and cosmetic surgery at their disposal, it seemed that these burn scars could not all be completely healed. But Wakaba was okay with that. To her, it felt like erasing all traces of her war scars would erase the fact that the war itself had happened-- Like it would erase the memories of the friends who had fought beside her. That would be even more sad in Wakaba's eyes.

- "..."

Hinata's eyes were watching Wakaba. But something about those eyes made them seem all too empty and cold. As if she had lost all emotion. As if she were looking at Wakaba but not seeing anything-- As if her consciousness were somewhere else.

- "Hinata, what's wrong...? Thinking about something?"

- "Hmm, well... Since Shikoku's probably going to be at peace, I was wondering what I should do with you from now on, Wakaba-chan."

- "... What?"

- "Please get better soon. I'm sure... everything will be fine now..."



Perhaps the strengthening of the barrier was successful. As the Taisha had said, there had been no more Vertex invasions in Shikoku since that final battle.

Since Wakaba could fully dedicate herself to medical treatment rather than fighting, her recovery had progressed quite well.

The seasons were changing.

Time was flowing.

For a while, nothing unexpected happened.

Eventually Wakaba was discharged and was able to return to school. But now that the classroom only had two students, it felt like it had already lost its purpose.

But then one day, the Taisha gave Wakaba an assignment as a hero. It felt like it had been ages since she had done anything as a hero.

According to the Taisha, abnormal activity had been observed in Vertexes outside the barrier. It was not an incoming invasion, just some sort of strange movements, apparently. Wakaba was instructed to investigate.

Hinata and Wakaba now stood atop the Seto Inland Sea wall. Wakaba wore her hero outfit with sword in hand so that she could protect Hinata in case anything happened.

When they had previously investigated the colossal Vertex outside the wall, Hinata did not accompany the heroes out of fears she would be a burden. But this time, Hinata decided to accompany Wakaba out of her own volition. She wanted to see the outside world.

Now, due to the barrier's visual obstruction, the other side of the wall appeared to be calm without anything happening out of the ordinary.

"Let's go, Hinata. It's a terrible sight out there, so I'm sure it'll be hard to look at, though..."

"It's okay. I'm prepared..."

Wakaba and Hinata walked to the other side of the wall together. The moment they crossed it, the sight of everything around them suddenly changed.

Exposing the world in its true form.

Outside the wall were countless common Vertexes. They were swarming together, attacking the barrier in an attempt to get in, only to be repelled.

The barrier indeed seemed to be strengthened. Now it seemed that common Vertexes could not enter no matter how many of them grouped up together.

Several began to attack Wakaba and Hinata upon noticing their presence. Wakaba cut them all down before they could even get close to Hinata.

(I don't want... to lose anything or anyone else. At the very least, Hinata should be...)

As she defeated the common Vertexes, she kept her eye on the Seto Ohashi Bridge. That one colossal Vertex was over there. In the previous invasion, that Vertex did not make its appearance. Instead, seven other large Vertexes attacked in its place.

Upon closer inspection of the colossal Vertex, there were no more common Vertexes fusing to it. The body was already complete, but it showed no signs of moving. It was several times bigger than any of the other large Vertexes that had previously invaded Shikoku.

In addition to the colossal Vertex, there were also several developing large Vertexes scattered around here and there. Large Vertexes identical in appearance to ones defeated in the past were reemerging as well.

-"How... could this be...?"

An utterance of despair seeped from Wakaba's mouth.

The heroes had sustained heavy injuries and even death to defeat those large Vertexes. And yet those Vertexes were just endlessly regenerating themselves time after time, Vertex after Vertex.

To make matters worse, the reemerging large Vertexes weren't exactly like their predecessors. The large Vertexes the heroes had defeated were hollow. But the now-forming Vertexes-- each had something glowing inside. Wakaba and Hinata couldn't tell what it was, but there was something inside those hollow shells... The Vertexes were further evolving. Further strengthening.

Hinata wordlessly gazed upon the scene before her. The harsh reality of the sight had Wakaba nearly on her knees, yet Hinata simply gazed on. As if to ascertain the world itself.

--!

----!

-----!

Suddenly, a repulsive sound began echoing from the colossal Vertex. A sound somehow beyond human understanding. Meanwhile, its body began to shine with an ominous light. The lights began to flicker changing colors with irregular frequency and intensity.

-"What...!?"

The unpleasant sound continued echoing. And as if in response to the colossal Vertex's sound and flickering lights, the other large Vertexes began flickering as well.

And from beyond the sea, a pulsating sound began pounding.

The air shook. The seas raged.



The pulsating beat grew bigger, stronger.

(I don't know what's going on... but it can't be anything good...!)

Wakaba clenched her fists. Should she take Hinata and run? But where? This anomaly was on a global scale. There was nowhere to run.

The ground began to tremble.

- "Uwah!?"

- "Kyah!"

The tremors were intense enough to throw them off balance. The ground kept swaying without any sign of stopping. No, the tremors were actually growing stronger.

- "Hinata, hold onto my hand!"

- "Okay!"

Hinata caught Wakaba's outstretched hand.

From beyond the sea, a sound like the cry of a beast added to the cacophony. The ominous discord spread out across the world.

The Vertexes' flickering grew more intense.

Pillars of light rained down from the sky unto the sea, causing whirlpools. It was as if holes had been drilled in the bottom of the sea.

- "Amenonuboko... the heavenly jeweled spear..."

Hinata murmured dumbfoundedly.

A gigantic ball of flame appeared from over the horizon. The sun? But it was way too gigantic, and the sun was already out in the sky.

The second sun grew larger and larger as did its luminance.

The pillars of light continued stirring the sea. The land continued to tremble. The dissonance continued to echo.

The second sun grew large enough to cover the entire sky before slowly beginning its descent.

The heavens-- were falling--

The falling sun's light and heat soaked into the world.

Wakaba could no longer see anything. Nothing but a white world. A world of nothing but light. The world was eaten by the heavens.

But-- in Wakaba could still feel the sensation of Hinata's hand in hers.

- "Hinata!!"

Despite not being able to see anything, in a split second decision, Wakaba pulled Hinata into her arms and leapt backwards.

Behind her was the inside of the barrier.

Once they returned inside the barrier, the world changed.

The ordinary sight of the Seto Inland Sea spread out around them.

- "What... on earth was that...?"

Wakaba turned pale as she let Hinata out from within her arms.

Hinata had turned pale as well.

- "I have no idea... But... I think it'd be best we not go outside the barrier for now..."

- "... Yeah..."

Wakaba lost all strength in her body and fell to her knees.

What exactly had just happened to this world?

After some time had passed, Wakaba and Hinata hesitantly tried stepping outside the barrier.

- "...!!!"

Wakaba and Hinata's eyes popped. What spread out before them was a completely different world. The land was pulsating with an ominous crimson color, covered with what looked like lava. Every now and then, crimson flames gushed out from the land. And as if to simply mark their territory, common Vertexes were swarming across both the earth and the sky. Yet for some reason, all of the large Vertexes had disappeared.

Not a trace remained of the globe as it had once been.

Wakaba gazed at the sight in shock.

- "Has the world... been destroyed...?"





"No... 'destroyed' isn't the right word. The logic of the world itself has been rewritten...!"

Throughout the entire world, not a single thing born of human hands remained.

Not the houses people lived in.

Nor the skyscrapers in the cities.

Nor the fields Shiratori plowed.

Everything had been lost.

Complete and total eradication. Any hope of survival had been cut off.

"Any possibility of a comeback for humanity... has been crushed, hasn't it..."

Hinata clenched her fist as she gazed upon the transfigured world.

All that remained of the world was what little the barrier could protect in Shikoku.

"Damn... it..."

Wakaba clenched her teeth. Almost hard enough to snap them. Rage. Regret. Frustration. Despair. Sorrow. All sorts of mixed emotions welled up inside her--

After they had returned to Marugame City, Hinata reported to the Taisha what had happened outside the barrier.

Several other miko had received oracles when the world had been rewritten, so the Taisha had a grasp on the situation as well.

Thankfully, the strengthening of the barrier was completed in time, allowing Shikoku to narrowly escape its apparent utter destruction. Although humanity's natural predator had rewritten the logic of the world, the interior of the Shinju's barrier was outside of their scope. Perhaps Shikoku was indeed worthy of being called a "Neno-Katasu-Kuni".

Wakaba and the other heroes were able to successfully keep the invasion of Shikoku in check long enough for the barrier to be strengthened in time. And thus, humanity escaped its annihilation.

However-- the moment the Shinju ran out of power would perhaps be the moment humanity met with extinction.

After finishing her investigation mission, Wakaba began training harder than ever.

Though she had lost all of her teammates, Wakaba swung her sword alone and forged her body.



Including the abnormally colossal Vertex, twelve large Vertexes were confirmed in total. For the sake of convenience, the Taisha named these twelve after the twelve constellations of the zodiac.

It felt appropriate to christen these heavenly entities with the names of heavenly bodies.

Though the barrier had been strengthened, safety was not guaranteed for eternity. The twelve large Vertexes had disappeared for now, but by no means did that meant the Vertexes were gone for good. They would most likely reappear one day.

And when that day arrived, it could only be a matter of time before even the strengthened barrier's defenses are breached.

If--

If all twelve of those monsters came attacking at once, Wakaba would have to stand up to them all by herself. It would likely be the most hopeless of battles yet.

(But even so... I'll have to do it. If I fall back, then everything my friends fought for, and the lives they sacrificed, will be for nothing... I must continue to protect this world and its people... at all costs...!)

With heroic determination in her heart, Wakaba once again trained herself at Marugame Castle's inner citadel today. She swung her sword until the sun set, when her arms became too fatigued to even move. It was then that Hinata appeared.

"I see you're training again today."

"Yeah. ... It's my obligation as the one who survived."

Hinata watched Wakaba. Her eyes were cold with somehow unreadable emotion.

"... There's just one thing I'd like to talk about."

Once they were in Wakaba's dorm room, Hinata started speaking.

"Wakaba-chan, there's no more need for you to fight."

"... That's not true!"

Almost reflexively, Wakaba denied Hinata's words.

Does she mean the Vertexes would no longer attack because of the strengthened barrier? But the barrier's power isn't absolute. That's why I have to fight--

Before Wakaba could speak her mind, Hinata continued matter-of-factly.

"The barrier will endure for now, but once the Shinju-sama's power runs out, we will be engulfed in the sea of flames, and all will be over. You could say that human extinction is already complete. Indeed... it was -because- of the desperate situation so far... that we found a means of survival."

"... What?"

"This was our first attempt, but it was a success. We have named this divine ritual the 'offering fire festival.'"

"What's this about...?"

Instead of answering Wakaba's question, Hinata continued speaking in an emotionless voice. "The Taisha held a festival. Outside the wall... They spoke to the heavens and prayed, asking for amnesty from invasions on the condition that we no longer leave this land."

"They... spoke? How is that even--"

"There is precedent for receiving amnesty in such a way dating back to the ancient age of gods. ... In accordance with the heavenly command, I will at once yield up this Ashihara-no-Nakat-sukuni, the Central Land of Reed-Plains. But as to my place of residence, if ye will make stout the temple pillars on the nethermost rock-bottom, and make high the cross-beams to Takama-ga-hara, the Plain of High Heaven, like the rich and perfect august nest where the august child of the Heavenly Gods rules the succession of the Heaven's sun, and will deign to establish me, I will hide in the eighty (less than a hundred) road-windings, and wait on him..."

"The king of land gods once pledged this oath to the heavenly gods. He would not leave his dwelling place on the condition that he be granted amnesty from any other aggressions. And now, we followed in that example."

Rituals and ceremonies are simply the symbolic reproduction of agreements made in legends. The Taisha copied the events told in the legend of "the Abdication of Okuninushi" in order to seek amnesty from the heavenly gods.

"The enemy's goal is probably the extermination of the land dwellers-- in other words, us. They've pretty much effectively achieved that goal now, and so it's only because of that timing that this was all possible. As miko, we receive oracles. We hear the voices of gods And as miko... we had our side of the story heard... by heaven."

"... How...?"

Miko hear the voices of gods. But up until now, all communications with the Shinju have been one way: from gods to humans. Just how exactly did human words reach the those in the heavens?

"--Through the sea of fire."

"...!?"

"Six miko were chosen."



- "Wait, don't tell me they were sacrificed....!?"

- "I'm only telling you this after the fact because they knew you'd be against it."

Hinata kept speaking with a detached, emotionless tone.

- "Hinata... you!"

Without thinking, Wakaba forcefully grabbed Hinata by the shoulders. It had to have hurt, but Hinata didn't move so much as an eyebrow.

- "I was originally supposed to be chosen as a sacrifice as well."

- "Wha...!?"

- "But I played my cards right and excluded myself from the selection. I didn't want to die. I'm such a unfair, cruel woman."

Hinata smiled weakly.

A callous smile unfitting of the usual Uesato Hinata. It was the look of a cold, shrewd, selfish girl.

But--

But that's why Wakaba understood.

As her childhood friend, only Wakaba understood.

- "Don't say it like that! Hinata... it was because of me, right? You stayed behind out of concern for me. If I lost you too, I'd... No, I'm sorry. I know it must've been tough for you too... I'm sorry for projecting onto you..."

The moment Wakaba said that, a single line of tears formed on Hinata's cheek. Without changing her facial expression, without changing her emotions, Hinata wept.

- "... There wasn't any other path left for us to take. Wakaba-chan... not even you can possibly keep fighting forever all alone... You heroes have given everything so far. So now it was time for the miko to give everything."

Wakaba wordlessly clenched her fist.

- "After the ceremony was over... an oracle came in. If we remain in these lands and abandon our hero powers, we will no longer be attacked."

- "... Relinquish your power or else, huh..."

- "Perhaps... it's taboo for humans to use divine power. According to them, at least."

- "Khh...!"

Wakaba said nothing. For there truly was no other way. As long as she lacked the power to protect others herself, she had no right to raise any complaints.

- "Uuugghhh... ugghhh, ghaaaaaaaaahhh!!"

Wakaba fell to her knees, screaming. Weeping.

She had lived as a hero for four long years. But no matter how strict her training was, she had never felt this much anguish. No matter how badly she got injured in battle, she never felt this much pain. No matter how much the unseen future had pressured her, she never felt this much sadness.

She couldn't protect her friends.

She couldn't prevent the sacrifice of so many lives.

She couldn't reclaim the happiness stolen from them.

- "... How can I be... so... powerless...! Ugghhh....!!"

For a long time, Wakaba wept.

Hinata said nothing and simply sat beside her.

The sun set and night arrived.

Eventually Wakaba's throat dried out and her tears depleted.

After a lifetime's worth of tears, she finally looked up.

Before she had realized it, the night had ended, and the morning sun shined through her window.

Wakaba and Hinata stood together atop Marugame Castle's inner citadel.

From there, they could see the sunrise, the inhabited city streets, and the Seto Inland Sea beyond.

No longer was Wakaba's face tinged with sorrow or despair.

Since she had cried enough tears for a lifetime, she had no tears left to shed.

Not now, not ever.

- "Hinata. We've lost so much..."

- "We did."



- "But we survived."

- "Yes, we did!"

- "In that case, our battle's not over yet."

- "I agree."

Hinata answered firmly, causing a smile to form on Wakaba's face. Their wills were one in the same.

- "... Alright. Let's try sorting out the current situation based on things like the latest oracle."

Hinata nodded.

- "Our enemies are gods. Heavenly gods. ... Gods who want us humans extinct. We don't know the reason why, but at the very least, they hate human use of divine power."

- "Our allies are also gods. Land gods. ... Gods who protect us from the heavenly gods' attempt at human extermination. These land gods conglomerated to form the Shinju-sama..."

- "Four years ago-- on that fateful July. When the cataclysmic event occurred, the heavenly gods and the land gods were fighting. And the land gods lost. ... As the victors, the heavenly gods sent down the Vertexes. The land gods joined forces to form the Shinju and bestowed humans with divine power."

- "Correct. And the only ones who could combat the Vertexes constructed by gods-- were the heroes who had divine power."

The heroes' power was derived from the Shinju-- in other words, from the land gods. The land gods' power allowed one to oppose the forces of the heavenly gods... And those who had that power were called heroes.

- "We repelled the Vertexes, but we've been driven this far up against the wall... bringing us to talks of reconciliation. Which brings us to now..."

- "We're at an overwhelming disadvantage. But through several sacrifices... humanity survived."

Hinata and Wakaba's voices were both heavy. But they were not simply depressed.

- "This is nothing more than a temporary truce. We fought hard enough to escape extinction. We just need to store that strength and build it up until we can achieve our dearest wish... Historically, it's not a rare situation at all. It's true that we can't win as we are right now. We have no choice but to accept that truth. But it's for that very reason... that we must build up the strength to win."

- "Indeed. Despite how I might look, I am angry. Let's make sure we recover. Once we lose the Shinju-sama, we lose Shikoku as well, but the Shinju-sama should have a lifetime of hundreds of years. Let's use that time to find a counter strategy."

Hinata declared resolutely.

Just how much time would humanity need to gain the strength to defeat the heavens? The path ahead of them is endless, difficult, and all too dangerous.

But it is a journey that must be made.

- "... About Yuuna..."

- "After her vital signs disappeared, she became part of the Shinju-sama... At least, that is what I believe... Perhaps taking her in was part of how the Shinju-sama's barrier was strengthened..."

Hinata chose her words carefully as she answered.

- "I see... Yuuna was a really good guy. I always felt like she had the heart of a god or a buddha... but to think that even the gods have gotten stronger because of her."

Though that seemed like a possibility for Yuuna, both Wakaba and Hinata truly felt like that was the case.

As a hero, Yuuna gave her friends strength.

And now, as a part of the Shinju, she continues to give the gods strength as well.

- "Her feelings probably protected Shikoku. She truly is a Living God (Arahitogami)."

- "... Say, Hinata. If she's a part of the Shinju... then can you talk to her as a miko...?"

Wakaba asked with just the faintest hint of expectation.

But Hinata shook her head.

- "... It would be wonderful if that happened... It's not like it would be a sin if it did... but unfortunately, the Shinju-sama's status has not changed much from how it was previously."

- "I... see... But let's keep looking for possibilities. Some sort of miracle to bring everyone back..."

- "I feel the same way..."

But in the back of their minds, they knew:

Lost lives do not come back.

To fix the mood, Wakaba steered the conversation back to more realistic things.

- "The main problem is that if things continue the way they are, then the hero system will have to be abandoned."



"We won't be able to do such large-scale research publicly anymore, huh... We'll have no choice but to be patient and do it the long, drawn-out way. We need to show complete allegiance for the time being."

"True..."

Humanity was abandoning its war potential.

But it was not a complete surrender. It was not a permanent cease-fire.

"So what exactly do we have to do for the time being?"

Hinata already seemed to have a plan in mind as she answered Wakaba's question without any hesitation.

"First, we will rename the Taisha from 'grand shrine' to 'amnesty' as a self-conscious reminder that we have been granted amnesty and live modestly as human beings."

"Amnesty... what a humiliating name. But that's what will make it a reminder. A reminder of the hopelessness of defeat. The sorrow of having everything stolen away."

"Yes. And the biggest goal of the name change is to use it as an excuse to reorganize the structure of the organization. The way it is now, it is excessively crude as an organization. We need to rebuild it as a more secretive organization."

"..."

"This is a job for me and Aki-san... and the rest of the remaining miko. As oracle receivers, we must conduct ourselves properly. I'm a cruel woman after all."

"... Then my role is to maintain the emotional stability of the citizens, huh. To guide the people in life. And underneath the table, we build our strength. There are so many things we need to do, huh. First, we need to improve the base power level of the hero system. Big time. The enemy can't clearly see what goes on deep within the underworld protected by the Shinju's roots."

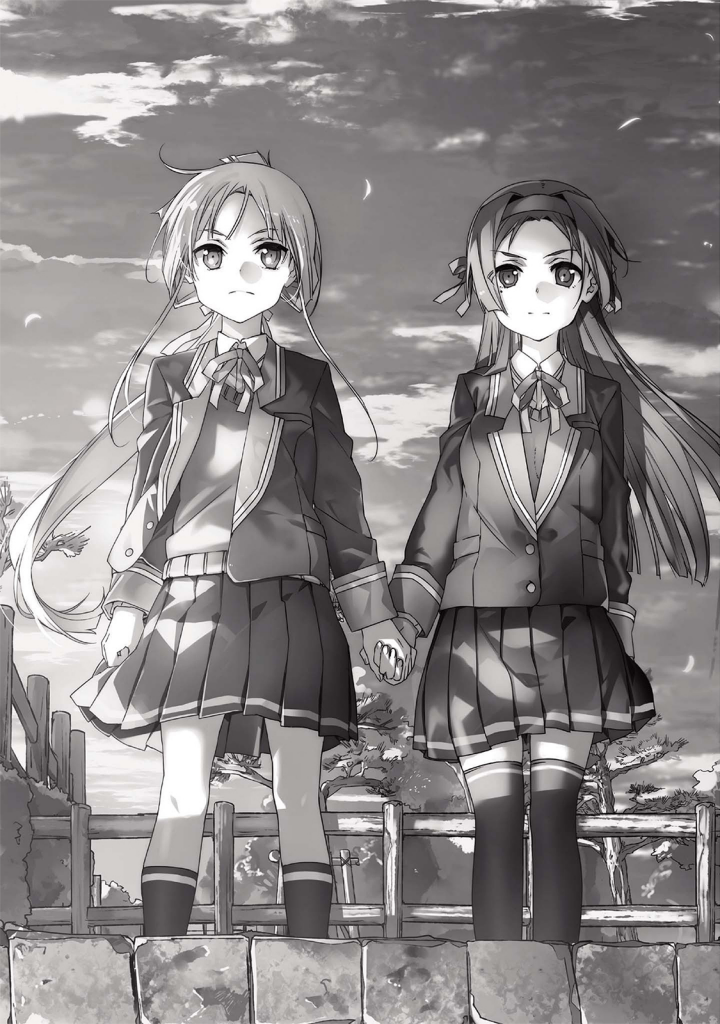
"With time and science... I'm sure we can advance the system to the point we can defeat the enemy and find a way to return the logic of the world back to normal. We've got gods on our side too, you know."

Let's trick those heavenly gods.

Sooner or later, let's prepare enough power to ascend to their level.

Just bide time and wait until then.

"For now, we'll call a truce... but I swear..."





- "Yes. Let's swear that we'll recover. We'll reclaim normal life for everyone."

Wakaba and Hinata held hands as if to ascertain each other's existence.

It was their obligation for surviving at the cost of the sacrifices of others. To succeed the wills of the deceased and to clear a path for the future.

It was a heavy burden for such young girls.

But they had the resolve.

- "... What's frightening is the thought of our rebellious spirit fading over the course of this long battle... I can't help but worry about it, even now..."

- "Let's just do whatever it is we can. Like leaving something behind for future heroes-- or something."

And thus, Nogi continued her duty as the sole surviving hero-- or rather, she stood at the head of all legendary heroes who had previously graced the earth.

The Vertex invasion was halted and humanity welcomed a time of peace.

Year One Divine Era (1 DE)--

Their lives spared, humanity restructures the Taisha from the "Grand Shrine" to "Amnesty" and reforms the calendar system to the new "Divine Era" commemorating the Shinju.

72 DE--

The last survivor of the Vertex invasion dies of old age.

100 DE--

Humanity reaches its hundredth year of peace.

Zero Vertex invasions since the beginning of the Divine Era.

The very words "Vertex", "Hero", and "Uranophobia" lose their sense of reality and become archaic words used only in historical contexts.

However, one peculiar cultural practice remains. Girls who exhibit certain specific actions at the time of their birth-- such as reverse clapping-- are given the name "Yuuna" by the Taisha in reverence to the legendary hero Takashima Yuuna. Perhaps in quiet defiance against the heavenly gods.

Furthermore, in commemoration of the year 100, as well as to protect the mental stability of the population, all records of the Vertex menace are erased. Instead, the explanation that a deadly Virus destroyed the world outside of Shikoku is circulated and takes root.

However.

Hidden away from nearly all of humanity, development on the hero system continues.

After years upon years, all of that work will come to hold a significant meaning.

Entrusting hope onto the future--

(Nogi Wakaba is a Hero END)